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Masculinity and Transgression in Robert Frost

So that henceforth I worked no more alone;
But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,
And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;
And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.
“Men work together,” I told him from the heart,
“Whether they work together or apart.”
—Robert Frost, “The Tuft of Flowers.”

The questions beneath the surface of “The Tuft of Flowers” are questions which resonate throughout much of Robert Frost’s poetry: what, finally, can men be to one another? what habitable point is there for men between the impossible ideals of brotherhood and the common, disenchanting reality? The epigrammatic close of “The Tuft of Flowers,” though offering little as an answer, does much to illustrate the problem:

“Men work together,” I told him from the heart,
“Whether they work together or apart.”¹

Here, the speaker is raised out of his state of quiet desperation by the idealized power of male companionship. The final spoken couplet is his simple, sentimental anthem to society’s vision of masculine bonding. The disparity between the real and the ideal, however, cannot be wished away. The bond between the speaker and his friend is characterized by an insuperable distance—indeed, they have never met—and thus, rather than manifesting the consummation of the intimately homosocial, it merely

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recapitulates the expression of such desire.² There is no real friend and no real friendship; the fraternal tie in "The Tuft of Flowers" exists purely on the level of illusion. We are left to wonder at the end whether or not this is precisely and exclusively the place for it.

Criticism of Frost has, of course, broached such questions about male-to-male friendship before. Philip Gerber, for example, has quite poetically traced the pattern of struggle for communion and collapse into alienation which beleaguers the men of Frost's poems. Like others, however, he throws up his hands at the root causes of this alienation, leaving us with a poignant but unsatisfying existentialist given "that man is alone."³ Richard Poirier has also noted the difficulty of establishing contact between men, but he quickly segues from these problems of homosocial relations to one of the main focuses of his work: namely, gender-free issues of speech acts and language.⁴ Criticism on Frost has thus consistently traced the edges of the problem of homosocial relationships, building up a discourse that surrounds but never penetrates and creating, ultimately, a lacuna that it is my intention to explore.

To return: the dilemma of "The Tuft of Flowers" sets the tone for the remainder of Frost's homosocial poems. His poetry, though frequently expressing the desire for and belief in the ideal of male companionship and intimacy, almost exclusively depicts examples of male relationships which are defined by alienation, tension, and nearly pathological competitiveness. What are the root causes of the fraternal alienation which Frost explores? The answer, I believe, requires a discussion of sexuality in male identity.

Once again, critics have discussed issues of sexuality in Frost's poetry before—or rather, issues of heterosexuality. And this exclusive focus has produced some very fruitful readings: Poirier's analyses of "A Servant to Servants" and "The Fear" come immediately to mind. On the other hand, the concomitant silence regarding sexuality *between* men has led to a number of unfortunate exclusions and simplifications: Poirier's somewhat antiseptic treatment of "The Witch of Coös," for example. Though explicit, realized homosexuality is not a central focus in Frost's poetry—nor, indeed, in this essay—an awareness of its absence—always-threatening-to-become-presence (as the unknown of fear or desire) informs much of Frost's work. Heretofore, the issue has been left unexplored.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has written extensively on the complexity of male homosocial relations and their relevance to literature. In particular,

she has stressed the huge import of homophobia in male relationships. The slippery slope between friend and lover in the spectrum of male homosocial interaction, she claims, gives rise to homosexual panic, internalized as homophobia, which serves as a controlling device to regulate “the amorphous territory of ‘the sexual.’” Male relations are systematically problematized, she claims, because “for a man to be a man’s man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being ‘interested in men.’”⁵ It is this predicament which intrigues Frost, and which brings about many of the difficulties between men in his poems.

The Wall

Frost explores the psychology of homophobia most overtly in “The Grindstone.” Before discussing this poem, however, it is useful to consider “Mowing.” This poem, essentially, portrays the restorative power of man’s work. For the speaker, harvesting wheat is generative and invigorating, like making love; work reveals truth, cleansing men of harmful delusions and the lies of “easy gold.” Heterosexual images, it seems, are the most fitting for such a beautiful state. He describes the work of his scythe as “the earnest love that laid the swale in rows” and later plays on a common colloquialism, telling how his “long scythe . . . left the hay to make.” The speaker effectively transfigures the landscape into an erotic playground, acknowledging the existence of only those elements which can function in a symbolically sexual fashion: “spikes of flowers,” “pale orchises,” and “a bright green snake” (17).

Conversely, work that has become sick and ugly, leading to domination and humiliation rather than revitalization, is for the speaker of “The Grindstone” best expressed through images of the homosexual. Here, a younger and older man work together to sharpen a blade, but the force each invests only serves to make the labor of the other more difficult. Phallic, masturbatory, and ultimately homosexual images accumulate to describe this futile struggle: “all day I drove it hard, / And someone mounted on it and rode it hard, / And he and I between us ground a blade” (189). If “Mowing” is a glorification of heterosexual love, “The Grindstone” is a virulent denigration of homosexuality. Through his use of imagery, the speaker here suggests that *unnatural* homosexual love is, at best, only a grotesque parody of *real* love; sterile and destructive, homosexual love grinds away precious blade rather than creating it. “I

could have found / A better way to pass the afternoon," the speaker says. He continues:

The thing that made me more and more afraid
 Was that we'd ground it sharp and hadn't known,
 And now were only wasting precious blade. (190)

There is, however, as is typical with Frost, a second level of interpretation that quite subverts the speaker. "The Grindstone" is essentially an illustration of the negative effects of impulsive homophobia. The speaker here is plagued by the fear that intimate male interaction can become sexualized and thus destructive. This insecure, homophobic mentality makes communion between the men impossible and, further, transforms physical labor—normally a rejuvenating force in Frost's poetry—into a series of unwholesome and bewildering tasks. The speaker's fear is portrayed, ultimately, as destructive and irrational. By the end of the poem his enmity for the older man has heightened to a nearly hysterical pitch. Thinking that his partner "might be badly thrown / And wounded on his blade" (190), the speaker laughs with pleasure. His fears, it seems, dehumanize him just as surely as their realization would.

"Mending Wall" shows how one can avoid such a catastrophe. It is a succinct metaphorical investigation of instrumental homophobia, which operates as a safeguard against impulsive homophobic reactions such as the one illustrated above. The wall that separates the speaker and his neighbor in "Mending Wall," though symptomatic of distrust, is profoundly satisfying to both men, for it provides an identifiable point of discontinuity in the relation of male homosocial and male homosexual bonds. At first glance this is not apparent; the speaker posits himself as a rebel, always on the verge of asking his neighbor why good fences make good neighbors. He is an ally of the natural forces that attempt to subvert the wall—or so he says. His actions, however, belie his words. He is the one who comes alone to make repair after the hunters "have left not one stone on a stone"; and he, each spring, is the one who initiates the rebuilding: "I let my neighbor know beyond the hill; / And on a day we meet to walk the line / And set the wall between us once again" (33).

The poem is a perfect portrait of the tension and distrust inherent in male relations. The men can only interact when reassured by the constructed alienation of the wall. Making touch impossible, it reduces the threat of sexuality: "We keep the wall between us as we go. / To each the boulders that have fallen to each." Notice the inviolability of the wall:

the border will not be crossed, and no assistance will be given, even if there are far more boulders on one side than another. Each man appreciates the distance imposed by the wall, for it alone makes possible the “outdoor game” which unites them each year (33). Though this interaction can hardly be called intimate, it is undeniably positive and clearly desired by both men. However, they are free to talk and to accompany one another only so long as neither threatens to cross the border. When the speaker mischievously approaches his neighbor to ask why they need the wall, the neighbor rears up “like an old-stone savage armed” (34).

Thus, “Mending Wall” illustrates the paradox of certain homosocial relations, in which freedom to interact is contingent upon restriction. Form, ultimately, is the governing principle: form for Frost to control poetry, and form for the speaker to control male relationships. “When in doubt there is always form for us to go on with,” Frost says.⁶ However, Frost’s speaker also claims, with some gravity, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” (34). He consciously desires the more intimate interaction between men that can exist only without a wall, while subconsciously fearing it. That which is desired and that which must be are fundamentally different. The wall, unfortunately, is a necessity—both here and in the remainder of the homosocial poems.

“Mending Wall” is also significant because it depicts a sexual psychology that obtains for most of the men in Frost’s poetry. While “The Grindstone” shows how homophobia manifests itself in attitude and behavior, “Mending Wall” reveals the catalyst behind this fear-response. Social psychologist Sandra Bem has done interesting work on gender identification and social interaction, proposing what she calls a gender schema theory to account for different perceptions of sexuality and sexual roles. Her point, put simply, is that certain people are extremely gender schematic, perceiving and organizing even the most neutral of object/concept relationships by way of gender.⁷ Bem’s theory is suggestive and may be used to understand many of Frost’s poems. Often it is precisely this gender-schematic mentality which makes homosocial interaction problematic. The activation of sexual awareness while in the company of men consistently triggers a homophobic response. We shall see this process, without fail, throughout Frost’s homosocial poems. “Mending Wall” is a perfect introductory illustration. Here the natural world is a metaphor for the psychology of relationships. Quasi-sexual forces that “swell” and “spill” are precisely those forces which work to undermine and threaten the wall (33); or, put more abstractly, activation of a gender schema

(marked by perception of the landscape in sexual terms) makes the men painfully aware of their sexuality, triggering a defensive homophobic response that inhibits their relationship (thereby undermining the wall that brings them together).

Hence, the irony of “The Tuft of Flowers”: perhaps it is *only* when apart that men can work together. The closer physically and emotionally that men are, the more anxious they tend to become. Indeed, the ultimate closeness—physical touch—is a taboo strictly avoided in Frost’s poetry. When working together (or even fighting, as in “The Code”), men scrupulously avoid contact. In situations where walls or other preset boundaries exist, assuring that this tacit maxim will not be violated, functional interaction is possible. Where these boundaries are not present, even the most superficial interaction is disrupted, as we shall see in the next section.

Competition

The following cluster of poems depicts intimate homosocial interactions beyond the wall: competitive situations that invariably produce tension, animosity, and violence. In each poem the intensity of the homophobic response is completely out of proportion to the motivating cause—a sure sign that we must look deeper for a full understanding of what has transpired. Coppelia Kahn offers an important insight. Her psychoanalytically informed theories challenge and ultimately invert the Freudian hypothesis which claims that, because women lack a penis, gender identification is for them ambiguous, uncertain, even bisexual. According to Kahn, it is male gender identification which is insecure at the most fundamental level:

Most children, male or female, . . . are not only borne but raised by women. And thus arises a crucial difference between the girl’s developing sense of identity and the boy’s. For though she follows the same sequence of symbiotic union . . . her femininity arises in relation to a person of the *same* sex, while his masculinity arises in relation to a person of the *opposite* sex. Her femininity is reinforced by her original symbiotic union with her mother and by the identification with her that must precede identity, while his masculinity is threatened by the same union and the same identification. While the boy’s sense of *self* begins in union with the feminine, his sense of *masculinity* arises against it.⁸

In sum, masculinity (the animus) exists by continually proving itself against the object-identification of its primal scene (femininity, or the anima) and consequently is characterized by a kinetic rather than static state. To expand, I would suggest that in situations which cause heightened sensitivity in the animus to its interior anima (either by eliciting femininity or simply causing the belief that a feminine response will be elicited) one can expect a somewhat incommensurate reaction from the animus to re-establish gender equilibrium. A homophobic response, instrumental at the subconscious level but impulsive at the conscious, should be expected.

What situations heighten sensitivity to the anima? For gender-schematic men, the answer is relatively clear. Gender, traditionally, is associated with power: masculinity and femininity coupled in a relationship where masculinity perpetually dominates and femininity perpetually submits. Situations that threaten one with the loss of power, then, can often be perceived as threats to sexual masculinity itself (overstimulating, essentially, sensitivity to the interior anima)—hence the danger of the competitive homosocial situations of the following poems, where any number of objects or concepts can be transmogrified into expressions of the personal phallus. It would be a mistake, however, to see situations that invite competition as inevitable precursors to the homophobic response. Indeed, as will be shown later in “From Plane to Plane,” competition can be an effective stabilizing force in situations that guarantee their own perpetuation, n-play games (so to speak) in which the threat of conclusion, where one must finally be dominant and one must finally submit, is never present.

Likewise, explicit homosexuality is a threat to the animus because of its traditional association with femininity, and thus with submission. We refer once again to “The Grindstone.” Here the speaker is literally un-manned (even more, made into a woman) by his engagement in homosexual activity. Stimulating the phallic blade in a near sexual panic, he “changed from hand to hand in desperation,” a figure of helplessness (189). “I wondered if he really thought it fair,” he complains, “For him to have the say when we were done” (190). His words are evocative of the complaints of women involved in unsatisfying heterosexual sex—women who, in the very act of sex, must submit to the dominant male who determines when they shall finish. For the speaker here, homosexuality is commensurate with emasculation and thus represents the gravest threat possible to his masculinity. Male fear of being dominated by men is, essentially, the fear

of being feminized, or made into a homosexual—at heart, homophobia. Hence situations in which figurative phallic competitions break out into violence can be loosely defined as collective homophobic responses.

Accordingly, in Frost we find an exaggeration of the macho ethic in homosocial situations, as all involved parties attempt to prove their perpetually insecure masculinity; and, in situations where this competition has become determinative and the power equilibrium is questioned, we find extremity of anger and violence. Such is the case with the following poems. In “From Plane to Plane” and “The Code,” field work becomes the means by which men establish their masculinity. The working ground becomes a figurative phallic competition for men like James and Rod. When this competition leads to questions of competency or effectiveness, violence results. At the heart of the situation, sexual masculinity is the issue at stake—not individual hoeing style or preference of menial tasks.

“From Plane to Plane” illustrates the beneficial power of competition. Beneath the relatively peaceful discourse of the workers are strong undercurrents of hostility; as with “Mending Wall,” the catalyst for homophobic conflict is present. A gender schema has been triggered for both Frost and his characters, as revealed by Frost’s choice of the names Pike and Dick and by Pike’s defensive, sexually-freighted statement—“I wouldn’t hoe both ways for anybody!” (405). However, relations remain essentially peaceful—competition allows each man to reassure himself:

They were both bent on scuffling up
 Alluvium so pure that when a blade
 To their surprise rang once on stone all day
 Each tried to be the first at getting in
 A superstitious cry for farmers’ luck—
 A rivalry that made them both feel kinder. (407–08)

Clearly, such competition is stabilizing rather than determinative, thus alleviating the homosexual panic: “Neither of them was better than the other. . . . So if they fought about equality / It was on an equality they fought” (404).

Unlike “From Plane to Plane,” the competition in the second half of “The Code” ends up becoming determinative rather than stabilizing, and thus results in violence. Relations between the men in this poem are, from the very start, particularly tense. As with “Mending Wall” and now “From Plane to Plane,” a gender schema has been activated, as revealed by Frost’s use of phallic images to describe both the men’s labor and

their perception of the horizon—“cocks of hay” and “a perpetual dagger / Flickering across its bosom” (69). The men, as a result, are uneasy around one another. What are the limits to their interaction? How can they guarantee that no man will feel intruded upon? The workers attempt to construct their own wall by imposing an extraordinarily stringent set of rules upon all interaction—the code, as they call it. When a town-bred farmer, uninitiated into the ways of the group, makes a seemingly innocuous comment that transgresses this code’s narrow bounds, a fellow worker, James, interprets the man’s remark as an attempt “to find fault with his work” and explodes, leaving the field in a passion (70). Frost uses this story as a frame for a much darker one in which the homophobic response takes the form of attempted murder rather than flight. The worker who tells the story, a gender schema triggered, feels that his overseer, Sanders, is attempting to dominate him and the others by continually pushing them in their work and presuming to determine their pace. At one point Sanders and the worker pair off to unload the hay from the upper level of the barn. Sanders, the smaller of the two, preemptively takes the position of receiver, consigning the much easier job of unloading to the worker. Here he crosses the critical boundary between supervision and domination. The insult is tantamount to an assault: Sanders, by challenging the man’s ability as a laborer, by extension challenges his masculinity. The speaker describes the insult in clearly sexual language: “You understand that meant the easy job / For the man up on top . . . [he] Shouts like an army captain, ‘Let her come!’ . . . Never you say a thing like that to a man, / Not if he values what he is” (71). In a rage the worker attempts to bury the overseer under the loads of hay. (Note that even in his rage he avoids touching the man, instead attacking him in a metaphorical manner—unloading himself upon him, so to speak, in an attempt to reverse the sexual domination).

In “A Hundred Collars” the conflict is no longer subconscious. This poem confronts the explicit fear of male rape, certainly figurative and possibly literal. In this poem two men are forced to share a bedroom in a crowded hotel: Doctor and Lafe, the former smaller and wealthier, the latter larger and more robust. From the beginning, it is clear that the Doctor fears the possibility of being dominated and feminized by his roommate. “What kind of man [is he]?” he asks the proprietor. “I know him,” the proprietor responds, choosing his words tactfully: “he’s all right. A man’s a man” (45). The quarters, however, are far too intimate and associated too closely with sexuality for the Doctor to feel safe.

Lafe senses his anxiety and plays upon it; frightening the Doctor makes Lafe feel more virile (a man who can dominate another man in this quasi-sexual fashion, ironically, has only further proved the strength of his own masculinity). Lafe remains half-naked throughout the poem, offering the Doctor the collars he has outgrown, mimicking the seduction game by telling him to lie down and offering to pull his shoes off for him. "Don't touch me, please," the Doctor cries, clearly in a homosexual panic: "I'll not be put to bed by you, my man" (47). Later, Lafe tires of the games and proffers his bottle to the Doctor as a peace offering; but the border between "man-helping-the-interests-of-man" and "man-loving-man" has become indistinguishable for the Doctor, and he refuses. Any chance of communion between the men is stifled by the Doctor's homophobia and Lafe's desire for figurative rape.⁹ While in "Mending Wall" instrumental homophobia allowed the men to interact comfortably, in these three poems it only further strains the relationships.

By now the psychology behind Frost's homosocial tension has been fully traced. "The Grindstone" illustrates outright homophobia, or the fear-effect; "Mending Wall" reveals the catalyst that most immediately causes the fear-response; and finally these last three poems collectively illustrate the socio-sexual complexities that are the root of the fear.

Community

The most fitting example with which to summarize is "Paul's Wife," a poem Frost grouped with "The Ax-Helve" (to be discussed later) and "The Grindstone." This poem traces the difficulties of communal interaction and judgment, telling the story of a man perpetually uprooted from society: "To drive Paul out of any lumber camp / All that was needed was to say to him, / 'How is the wife, Paul?'—and he'd disappear. / Some said it was because he had no wife, / And hated to be twitted on the subject." Paul, because he has no wife, is suspected of being homosexual—perhaps he is, and perhaps this is why he is never able to find permanent acceptance among the men. At the same time, Paul is the quintessential figure of the macho ethic, performing wonders as a laborer that result in his being dubbed "the hero of the mountain camps" (191). The characters surrounding Paul, however, are at first forced by their own irrational fears to destroy this hero of their own making. They become unsettled by their own adoration of and identification with this man for one of two reasons. Perhaps on a subconscious level they are inse-

cure in their own sexuality. This manifests itself as conscious suspicion of Paul's—the fact that he does not have a wife thus begins to disturb them. Or perhaps it is simply that they cannot reconcile his masculinity with potential homosexuality: the two, for the characters of the poem, are necessarily mutually exclusive, for only in this way can homosexuality be categorized and defended against. If the most macho of them can be homosexual, how can any of them prove themselves as men? Indeed, if Paul is a homosexual their very definition of manhood is brought into question. Thus the men of the poem become quite disturbed, reacting in two ways: initially forcing him from their groups by pestering him about his wife, and, finally, creating a wife for him and thus guaranteeing his heterosexuality. The myth they create is a myth of beauty and power, fully commensurate with Paul's formidable reputation as a hero: like a god, he creates her from the very wood of his work. The poem is the ultimate solution for the men, transforming Paul into the dominant, heterosexual male stereotype which they desire:

So there were witnesses that Paul was married,
And not anyone to be ashamed of.
Everyone had been wrong in judging Paul.
Murphy told me Paul put on all those airs
About his wife to keep her to himself.
Paul was what's called a terrible possessor.
Owning a wife with him meant owning her.
She wasn't anybody else's business,
Either to praise her or so much as name her,
And he'd thank people not to think of her. (195–96)

This poem, then, represents Frost's keen awareness and abiding interest in the problem of sexuality in male relationships. It reveals the negative consequences of homophobia, the positive and genuine desire for interaction that underlies it, and, finally, society's desire for continuity between gender masculinity and sexual masculinity.

Gothic Novels and the “Unspeakable”

Frost's concern with homosocial relations is reflected in his concomitant interest in the Gothic. With its emphasis upon the hidden and perverse, the Gothic novel was the most fitting means available to nineteenth-century Europe, according to Sedgwick, for the exploration of transgres-

sive sexuality. As a genre, consequently, its major motifs included issues of male paranoia, homophobia, and the “unspeakable” (explicit homosexuality).¹⁰ Frost quite deliberately invokes this tradition in an extensive investigation of sexual complexities, “The Witch of Coös.” Here the issue of sex is quite literally unspoken, and indeed unspeakable. The silence engenders an important question: who are the lovers in the poem—the masculine woman and the masculine man, the feminine man and the masculine woman, or the masculine man and the feminine man? The Witch never clearly states what has occurred between the three, and there is reason to believe she herself does not know. Something unspeakable, she is certain, lies hidden with the bones: “Don’t that make you suspicious / That there’s something the dead are keeping back? / Yes, there’s something the dead are keeping back” (202).

This, of course, is not to say that this is a poem of explicit homosexual activity rather than heterosexual adultery. The dynamic between the characters is far more complex than that. A relevant and illuminating theory is offered by René Girard. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, he describes how in the erotic love triangle (consisting of the object, typically female, and the rivals, typically male, who are called intruder and victim) the bond between the rivals is of greater import and often more impassioned than the bonds between either the intruder and the object or the victim and the object. Expanding upon this, Sedgwick theoretically equates the erotic love triangle with Freud’s Oedipal paradigm, emphasizing that desire and identification are ultimately inextricable: “there is no secure boundary between wanting what somebody else (e.g., Daddy) has, and wanting Daddy.” Such theories provide a fitting abstract for “The Witch of Coös.” Here male heterosexuality can be defined as “traffic in women,” in which a female is used as a “conduit of a relationship in which the true *partner* is a man.” In the erotic love triangle, specifically, cuckoldry becomes a figuratively sexual act between men: heterosexual love becomes a tool for consummating homosocial desire.¹¹

This homosocial desire can either be nonsexual or sexual. However, when the relationship is marked by paranoia, hatred, or violence, it is likely to be the latter. Repressed urges, according to Freud, become explosive: “*paranoia persecutoria* is the form of the disease in which a person is defending himself against a homosexual impulse which has become too powerful. The change over from affection to hatred . . . may become a serious threat to the life of the loved and hated object.”¹² The relationship between the men in “The Witch of Coös” dovetails nicely

with Freud's description. Toffile is explosively violent (capable of murder) and irrationally paranoid. After all, he accepts without hesitation his wife's ludicrous claim that the skeleton has come back. Perhaps he suffers from *paranoia persecutoria*. The poem, essentially, depicts a complex psychological reaction-formation. For both men the subconscious "I hate her and love him" become the conscious "I love her and hate him." The libido of the wild young man is discharged through heterosexuality: he dominates Toffile, his object of desire, by taking his wife. The libido of Toffile, meanwhile, is discharged as violence. Murder and sex dissolve into one another as expressions of the same repressed urge.

As with "A Hundred Collars," homosexuality is at once masculinizing and feminizing. The wild country boy, despite his homosexuality, manages to keep his identity as a man intact. Indeed, he enhances it, channeling his homosexual energy into acts of power, domination, and heterosexuality.¹³ For Toffile, however, the case is much different. As for the speaker of "The Grindstone" and the Doctor from "A Hundred Collars," homosexuality here is linked with loss of power and with feminization. The Witch says that hearing of the skeleton made Toffile "throw his bare legs out of bed / And sit up by me and take hold of me" (205). He is completely emasculated: the bones of a dead man are more arousing to the Witch than Toffile and his cold bed. Toffile's gender identity is thus powerfully threatened by his homosexual impulses. The only way he can reassert himself is through murder: by such action the threat to his identity (that is, his homosexual urges) may be externalized as a threat against the enemy.

It seems quite likely that this is more than a simple case of adultery, guilt, and feminine dissatisfaction with the emotional constriction of "home," as Poirier has read it—particularly when one considers that the greatest expression of passion in the poem occurs between the men, in the act of murder. The adultery between the wild young man and the Witch is simply foreplay; the consummation, so to speak, occurs with the murder, when the woman is finally replaced by the true object of desire. Finally incidental, the Witch realizes that she must "Tell the truth for once." The bones "were a man's his father killed for me. / I mean a man he killed instead of me," she says, correcting herself (206). The murder was clearly not for her, as she has led herself to believe. Although she does not fully understand her marginality, she is nascently aware that somehow what has occurred was solely between the men, rather than between them and her—"instead of me." The bones, after all, brushed

quickly by her, heading upstairs to find Toffile. “Toffile,” the Witch cries, “It’s coming up to you” (205).

The Ax-Helve

The single poem which stands out in Frost’s work against systematic fraternal alienation is “The Ax-Helve,” a clear example of satisfying and intimate homosocial bonds. Here, as before, the men are sexually activated, the speaker recounting how Baptiste “chafed [the ax’s] long white body / From end to end with his rough hand shut round it” (187) and Baptiste closing the poem with the comment “See how she’s cock her head!” (188), revealing how he has come to associate his ax and its extraordinary qualities with his penis. Neither man panics, however; indeed, they move closer to one another, discussing their values and fears, summed up as “knowledge” (188). The speaker, whose friendship helps Baptiste “get his human rating” (186), is unique in Frost’s poems as a man who is able to pay sensitive and warm poetic attention to another man’s appearance (“Thick hand made light of, steel-blue chin drawn down / And in a little—a French touch in that” [188]). Their friendship is strong and intimate without being homosexual, and, more importantly, without being influenced by the fear of homosexuality. It seems, at least on the surface, to be the ideal of male bonding finally realized.

This poem, however, only confirms the pattern established in the earlier homosocial poems. Even in an ideal depiction, a wall is necessary for interaction. What makes this situation ideal is simply that in this instance the wall is not prohibitive. Homophobia is no longer the tool which provides the essential platonic/sexual discontinuity. The men are able to interact for two reasons. The first is the figurative wall of the axes. The men, at heart, are discussing Baptiste’s masculinity—his worth as a worker and as a creator. Unable to deal with this issue directly, however, Baptiste offers a substitute for his phallus, asking only to be judged by his axes. Second, the men are safeguarded by the presence of a woman. She is completely marginal to their discussion but absolutely essential as a chaperon; a sign of Baptiste’s heterosexuality, she assures the uncertain speaker that he is safe while also acting as a guard dog for Baptiste. Even if the guest is homosexual, he will now know to consider Baptiste off limits. It is important for her to remain part of the background, however, since exclusion of the female helps to make both men more virile.

Finally, there is a low-level competition between the men that is inher-

ently stabilizing. The situation invites a somewhat competitive response from the speaker—Baptiste is showing him, after all, how much better his ax is. Axes, however, are not the final definition of masculinity. They are only a way for Baptiste to get his human rating. Presumably, the speaker's turn will come soon, when he will be able to show Baptiste how he excels in another masculine area. The child-like game of phallic comparison is not determinative, for each contestant is given a turn in which his qualities will be fully revealed. Despite such attenuations, however, this poem remains the most hopeful of Frost's homosocial poems. Men can be friends when together physically, even if only under special circumstances.

Though there is only one such poem in all of Frost's published work, and though it is not the boundary-free interaction that the poem's surface suggests, "The Ax-Helve" offers an important perspective on the issues raised in this essay. Frost was profoundly engaged, influenced, and disturbed by modern American relations between men, but his attitude toward the formation of intimate male bonds was not wholly pessimistic. One must keep in mind the necessarily skewed representation that his poetry affords. Frost's verse carefully avoids the glib expressions of perfect joy that mark the poetry of undisciplined romantics. There is little happiness in his work that is not tainted, and made more poignant, by the addition of the sorrow that is inherent in the human condition. It is this interest in the "diminished thing" which takes Frost so deeply into the realm of marred and stunted homosocial relationships. Hence, as readers of Frost we should expect a focus on limited rather than ideal relationships, and we should expect a concomitant investment in complexity and difficulty rather than in Pollyannaish simplicity. "The Ax-Helve" thus stands opposed to "The Grindstone," but neither ultimately has an answer for the question posed in "The Tuft of Flowers": what, finally, can men be to one another? A single answer would be too simple.

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Notes

- 1 *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 23. Further references to this edition will be noted parenthetically in the text.
- 2 "Homosocial" refers to the spectrum of male interaction ranging from the most superficial to the most intimate. It includes, but is not limited to homo-

312 American Literature

sexuality. Eve Sedgwick succinctly expresses it as the range from “men-promoting-the-interests-of-men” to “men-loving-men” (*Between Men* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985], 3).

- 3 Philip Gerber, *Robert Frost*, rev. ed. (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 127.
- 4 Richard Poirier’s analysis, for example, of “The Code” and “A Hundred Collars” traces “the gradual accumulation of tensions about acts of speech, about how things are or were being said. Typically, each of the characters wants to lay claim to a ‘home’ territory by the power of speech, whether this be through some idiomatic coloring or with some anecdotal capacity” (*Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977], 110).
- 5 *Between Men*, 89. It is important to distinguish impulsive homophobia from instrumental. The former is an unpremeditated response—characterized by anger, disgust, or violence—to an unforeseen situation; the latter is the establishment of distance between men to prevent interaction that may be construed as, or become, sexual in nature.
- 6 Lawrence Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 387.
- 7 In one experiment, for example, subjects were told to memorize and recall a number of words from varying categories: proper names, articles of clothing, verbs, and animals. People who scored highly as gender schematic showed a strong tendency to group the material by gender (i.e., Paul, trousers, hurl, gorilla, as opposed to Mary, skirt, step, ant), while others grouped it by subject category.
- 8 Coppelia Kahn, *Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), 9–10.
- 9 Also of interest is the near one-to-one mapping of this poem to Freud’s analysis of Dr. Schreber—a small, nervous, well-educated man crippled by paranoia, fearing that the men around him are homosexuals attempting to violate him. To Freud, this pattern of behavior signified repressed homosexual urges in the Doctor; for our purposes, it only further illustrates how threatening unregulated homosocial desire can be.
- 10 *Between Men*, 90–95.
- 11 Ibid., 105–06, 25, 26, 49. See also Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes Toward a Political Economy of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).
- 12 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psychoanalysis, 1953–74), 16:424–25.
- 13 Notice, by the way, that this example fits nicely with our theory: the Witch is a wall constructed between the men to make their interaction, at least for the wild country boy, safe.



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